

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Welcoming Prophets

A lot of people don't know what a prophet is, and therefore they can't know whether or not they would welcome one. Some people have run away with the idea that prophesying means "telling the future". It's true that prophets can sometimes do this. But they aren't really so much concerned with the future as with the present, and their messages - and it is the message that makes you a prophet - always demand a radical change in people's present life.

### **(Un)comfortable Messengers**

Often we find the idea of change very threatening: but not always. Sometimes we have the grace to realise that our life can change for the better. This can be a prophet's gift to us. This is why we might actually welcome a prophet. We ought to register this fact: that God never abandons his plan for us - and this means that we might change into something startlingly new and original. It seems to me certain that God built into our nature the idea that we would grow and change. So when a prophet crosses our path, it may well have the effect of disturbing our roots, delivering the proverbial barrow-load of fertilizer, and presenting us with the power suddenly to cover ourselves with blossom, to welcome a few swarms of bees, and then to start producing fruit - even after a long, miserable, barren life that gave nothing good to anyone, least of all ourselves.

### **(Un)splendid Isolation**

One way of accepting a barren life is to pretend it's normal. *I'm fruitless*, we say, *I was never meant to produce anything*. That's an inner verdict many accept. But of course I can't tell other people that. So I go into a state of isolation: fruitless lives often lead to a carking loneliness, lived out in self-contempt and denial. But if the insulation is good enough I seldom need to accept that perhaps I made a mistake. That would be bad news, indeed: perhaps I painted myself into a false corner, maybe I have wasted my life. A prophet would be dangerous company here: he would tell me what I've done, and perhaps - most fearful of all - suggest that I swallow my pride, turn myself round, and take the humble journey out of my *cul-de-sac*, back to the high road where the others are still struggling to belong to each other, to make the gift of self, to learn love and compassion.

### **Grown Old In My Sins**

The older you are, the easier it becomes to accept that you are finished, that you will change no more. Old dogs, new tricks, we say. But notice the

false contempt in the word *tricks*; the implication is that I have nothing worthwhile to learn, and in my finished dignity and state of near perfection, what I can't do isn't worth doing. Older people have a deal of authority, and younger people have to be real prophets to get them to move and change. I think there is a question which can sometimes work on this mentality - in ourselves or in others. Never mind what's going to be said at the Last Judgment, just ask yourself today: "Is this person that I am now, am I, in my present condition, the finished product which God wants beside him in eternity?" If you can answer yes, I stand speechless. We are in the presence either of heroic sanctity or invincible presumption. If, by grace, you say *of course not*, then there is room for hope.

### **Room For Change**

Hope demands the possibility of change, and we welcome prophets primarily because they encourage us to find new hope, to be changed. They do this by reminding us of our past, of who we are, of the promises we have treasured and the responses we have made. They tell us the truth, awaken us to reality in the fullest possible context: they address us, in short, with the word of God. From our perspective God, like Heaven, and like Judgment, is often relegated to the future. But no-one can be addressed except in the present. So I don't look for a prophet to appear in camel-skins and Afro hair. I expect a person of my own time, who can bring me to face the reality of my own life, here and now, by speaking to me the Word of life. *Fr Philip*